

Further Notes on Capital Punishment

It is pretty clear from letters that some of the more zealous opponents of capital punishment have misread or misunderstood the editorial on that subject a few days ago. As a general thing *The Courant* is, as it has been for many years, convinced of the futility of capital punishment. The most recent editorial on the subject clearly stated that capital punishment for emotional crimes is not desirable. Then it went on to say that in our present society there are occasional individuals so warped that they kill for profit or for fun, with malice and deliberate forethought. These are always dangerous, in prison and out of prison, and in the present state of our society, there must remain the ultimate weapon of self-defense against such creatures.

This is the one factor that critics conveniently overlook. They base their entire argument on the reformable murderers who, everyone concedes, receive their punishment almost from the moment of their crime. And there is a difference between a statistical incidence of murder and what actually happens. Statistics have in back of them a variety of factors that may load them one way or another. An examination of the facts sometimes gives another picture.

For example, in 1957 it could be argued that the crime rate in Connecticut was no worse than it was elsewhere. But it is also true that six innocent persons were murdered that year by a man who had already murdered one person and been sent to prison for that offense. And oddly enough it is this precise case that is used by some opponents of capital punishment as proof that the threat of death does not act as a deterrent. That may be true. But it is inescapably true that the execution of this confessed murderer would have saved the lives of his six additional innocent victims.

Capital punishment is not a pleasant subject and understandably people recoil at the thought of it. But it remains true, that if two men now awaiting final disposition of their cases of murder, and who are said to have killed six persons in their mad-dog crime wave, were to be released or escaped from prison tomorrow, the entire community would be terror-stricken. It is reasonable to ask why those who murder repeatedly for profit or even for amusement should have rights that are superior to the safety of all the other members of society.

We have come a long way from the days when execution was the penalty for petty thievery. No doubt in the end capital punishment will be entirely abolished here, as it already has been elsewhere. Indeed it is time to refine our state laws on the subject, to confine capital punishment to those few beasts in human form who kill repeatedly. But meanwhile, before we turn those beasts loose to kill again, let us tighten our laws until life imprisonment actually means life imprisonment. And let us first also improve the quality of our prisons, so that such creatures do not go on killing even inside prisons, as has on occasion happened.